



# Regarding the Pain of Others

By Susan Sontag

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Twenty-five years after her classic *On Photography*, Susan Sontag returns to the subject of visual representations of war and violence in our culture today.

How does the spectacle of the sufferings of others (via television or newsprint) affect us? Are viewers inured--or incited--to violence by the depiction of cruelty? In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag takes a fresh look at the representation of atrocity--from Goya's *The Disasters of War* to photographs of the American Civil War, lynchings of blacks in the South, and the Nazi death camps, to contemporary horrific images of Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Israel and Palestine, and New York City on September 11, 2001.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag once again changes the way we think about the uses and meanings of images in our world, and offers an important reflection about how war itself is waged (and understood) in our time.

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Twenty-six years after the publication of her influential collection of essays *On Photography* (1977), Sontag (In America) reconsiders ideas that are "now fast approaching the status of platitudes," especially the view that our capacity to respond to images of war and atrocity is being dulled by "the relentless diffusion of vulgar and appalling images" in our rapaciously media-driven culture. Sontag opens by describing Virginia Woolf's essay on the roots of war, "Three Guineas," in which Woolf described a set of gruesome photographs of mutilated bodies and buildings destroyed during the Spanish Civil War. Woolf wondered if there truly can be a "we" between man and woman in matters of war. Sontag sets out to reopen and enlarge the question. "No 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain," she writes. The "we" that Sontag has come to be much more aware of in the decades since *On Photography* is the world of the rich. She has come to doubt her youthful contention that repeated exposure to images of suffering necessarily shrivels sympathy, and she doubts even more the radical yet influential spin that others put on this critique—that reality itself has become a spectacle. "To speak of reality becoming a spectacle... universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world...." Sontag reminds us that sincerity can turn a mere spectator into a witness, and that it is the heart rather than fancy rhetoric that can lead the mind to understanding.

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From Library Journal

The impact of violent images: Sontag's first full-length work on imagery since her acclaimed *On Photography* 25 years ago.

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From [Booklist](#)

Sontag, one of our most perceptive and valiant thinkers, offered a seminal critique of camera-mediated images in *On Photography*. Now, 25 years later, photographs and video of the bloody consequences of terrorism and war routinely fill the media, and Sontag offers a fresh, meticulous, and deeply affecting dissection of the role images of suffering play in our lives. Do photographs and television footage of the injured and dead serve as "shock therapy" or merely elicit a momentary shudder before they're forgotten? Do images of systematic violence engender compassion and antiwar sentiments or arouse hunger for revenge? Writing with electrifying clarity and conciseness, Sontag traces the evolution of the "iconography of suffering" from paintings by Goya, to photographs of concentration camps, to the first live and in-color war coverage to rage across television screens, that of the Vietnam War, to images of the destruction of the World Trade Center taken by amateurs and professionals alike. Sontag parses the difference in our response to images of terrorism at home versus abroad, and forthrightly addresses our pornographic fascination with images of the wounded and dead. Ultimately, Sontag, scrupulous in her reasoning and exhilarating in her arguments, arrives at a paradox: although we're inundated more than ever before by stark visual evidence of the "pain of others," we've yet to increase our capacity to do something about it. *Donna Seaman*

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